

7 KEYS TO  
STAYING SANE  
DURING THE  
COVID-19 CRISIS



MEG MEEKER, M.D.



Meg Meeker, M.D.—America’s family doctor—shares the seven keys to staying sane in the suddenly locked-down world of the coronavirus. Her new mini-ebook is your family’s essential guide not just to surviving but to thriving, even as your world is turned upside down.

Dr. Meeker prescribes practical steps that every family can take to handle the stress of close quarters, separation from friends, and unprecedented financial strain. Your family can even grow stronger as a result. Addressing the needs of the whole person—the physical need for a regular schedule and exercise, the emotional need for connection with others, the spiritual need for quiet prayer or meditation—Dr. Meeker sounds an encouraging call not to give in to the fear and chaos all around us.

An invisible germ turned our lives upside down in one short week. One day we had a job, the next day we didn't. Our kids were in school and suddenly they were home, cut off from friends and sports and forced to spend twenty-four hours a day with us. Streets went from crowded to eerily empty. Each adult and child stared at the walls of their homes wondering if life had changed forever or if this upheaval was temporary. On top of the fear that the COVID-19 virus brought regarding our physical health, many experienced varying degrees of emotional and mental turmoil. Was this the new norm for life? Would we get our jobs back, would our kids return to school, or would we be living this way for the next year?

The sudden change wouldn't have been so unnerving if life hadn't been so good before. We had good jobs, good schools, and low unemployment. Parents spent time with their kids and enough time away that we were excited to see one another when home. We never thought about how many rolls of toilet paper or bottles of Purell® sanitizer we had. Before COVID-19, some people had never used hand sanitizer. Now, it was a commodity rivaling gold.

The peculiar truth about life is that it really is fragile. When life is good, we know this in our minds, but we never quite believe it. Disruption, job loss, and pandemics are ideas that happen in other eras, in other countries. But now, it is happening in our time, in our homes. Unlike wars in years past, we had no warning. The COVID-19 epidemic blindsided us much the way an earthquake might suddenly tear houses down and crush people in their sleep.

The question for each of us now is: How can we thrive during this pandemic? Or even, can we? Many worry that they may not make it out of this alive, and I understand their fear. Some may not. But the reality is that the majority of us will. No one knows who will make it and who won't, and that's where the terrifying fragility of life hits home. The truth is, coronavirus may not be the last disruption of our lives, and it is important now to roll up our proverbial sleeves and get to the business of living with confidence, not fear. And we can absolutely do this.

But in order to stand up straight in the midst of fear, we need to be intentional. We need to adopt behaviors and strategies that seem foreign to us. We know that we can because we are strong people. Every single one of us can dig deep and thrive during this time, not just get by. We will learn remarkable lessons about ourselves and our loved ones. We will see parts of our characters that we never knew existed, and that's very exciting. As I said, however, making life changes to combat illness, fear, and disruption doesn't come without work. Here are seven changes any of us can make that will make life manageable and ease the burdens COVID-19 has thrust upon us.

### **1. Keep yourself and your kids on a daily schedule.**

We are creatures of habit, and we need a rhythm to our days. Most of us subconsciously establish these rhythms with our mealtimes, work, and sleep schedules. But with these broken, we need to start over. We used to get up at 7:00 a.m. and go to work, but since we work from home and can start at 10:00 a.m., why get up at 7:00 a.m.? Because it will keep you sane. We used to eat breakfast at 8:00 a.m., work until a lunch break at 12:00 p.m., and try to get some exercise before dinner. Kids went to school, worked until lunch, and either came home at 3:00 p.m. or went to soccer practice. But these daily routines are gone. No battles with reading, math, or science. No school lunches and no sports. Just open days with Mom or Dad at home. Can you imagine how this must feel to a senior in high school getting ready to graduate?

Moving forward from predictable activities to empty days, regardless of the reason, throws us all—adults and kids—physically, mentally, and emotionally off-balance. Our physiology runs on schedules—cortisol, neurohormones, and the many other hormones our bodies are used to releasing at certain times. They have figured out how to get us through our days, and now they too are disrupted.

We are the adults in charge of ourselves and our kids, and we need to be the first to take charge. We need to begin by making daily schedules for ourselves and our kids in order to restore balance. They can have flexibility, of course, but there are things our bodies and minds need to thrive. This means that we need time to think, exercise, and work in some capacity. Quiet time in which we can read or collect our thoughts, exercise to work the kinks out, and work to keep us feeling productive will be the difference between caving in or thriving. So if your days have become a free-for-all, shore things up at home. You don't need to be overly rigid, controlling the minutes in your and your kids' days, but you do need to know what will happen the next day during the morning, afternoon, and evening.

## **2. Schedule weekly Skype calls with friends and loved ones and write them on the calendar.**

Tackling the loneliness we experience when told to stay away from friends and family is probably the most difficult part of quarantine. When earthquakes, fires, or other natural disasters hit, friends and strangers cling to one another to move forward. It's human nature to lean on others for support and to want to help others. When we are separated, though, we can't cling or lean. We can't go to work and chat about our struggles with kids, our spouse, or work. Kids can't meet in the hallway and complain about their parents. While these releases seem trivial, they are necessary to help us stay emotionally balanced. Human beings are made for relationships. The reason we are alive is to have relationships with God and others. We aren't here simply to be good at our jobs, sports, or other activities. We were made to love, communicate, argue with, and comfort others. So when our intimacy with others is ripped away, we need to replicate it as nearly as we can.

This is where the miracle of screens comes in. One month ago, we complained about how screens have disrupted our lives and changed our relationships for the worse, and now we love them. They are saving us. Screens make it possible to see

others. We can't hug loved ones, but we can see their facial expressions. We can hear disappointment, affection, or sadness. We can help one another face the challenges before us. In that exchange, we feel supported and understood. If one of us is slipping into anxiety or depression, we can catch him before he surrenders to despair. Perhaps we can't do it as well as if we were face to face, but it is better than nothing. If another is thriving more than we are, we can ask for help and encouragement.

Screens can't give us real intimacy, but in the short term they provide us with helpful connection. Without that exchange, loneliness would overcome us and our mental fragility would expand. Any of us can fall into despair if cut off long enough from friends or family. We may feel independent, self-reliant, and fully autonomous (as we're told we should be), but we really aren't any of these. In a crisis, this truth hits us squarely in the face. It is tough to admit, but when we do, we are set free from many of the burdens we put on ourselves. Experiencing real loneliness and the need to connect with others makes us feel vulnerable and weak. That's because we are. Perhaps recognizing that we need one another is one of the greatest blessings in catastrophe.

### **3. Make everyone pitch in.**

One of the most precious gifts we have surrendered over the past thirty years is the necessity that families function as families. As we work to give our kids opportunities for growth and self-discovery, we have imposed an unhealthy autonomy on each family member. Parents are providers, kids are recipients of provisions. Life isn't about helping one another as a collective, interdependent unit but about figuring out who each person is separate from the others. If we look back in history, we see that no one thought that way before the 1950s. Mothers needed fathers, fathers needed mothers, and kids needed their parents. The interdependence wasn't just about money—it was far deeper. Each family member depended on the others for practical things like chores—cleaning, mowing

lawns, cooking, you name it. And they lived out the reality that they needed one another emotionally. Family were the go-to people who solved problems (or at least tried).

These dependencies are gone because we have cut family members off from one another. We can hire people to mow lawns, clean, cook, and do any chore that needs to be done at home. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, but if it causes family members to live private, disconnected lives, as it usually does, relationships suffer.

A calamity like a pandemic changes all this. No one outside of the family mows the lawn, cleans the house, or cooks. What a wonderful thing this is. It forces us to pitch in and help each other. Chores must be divvied up so that one person (usually Mom) doesn't crumble with exhaustion. Kids, of course, will complain ruthlessly about suddenly having to do work they never did, but the beauty is that once they work alongside parents and siblings, they see that they are important to the whole of the family. They matter. Each member of the family matters because the family functions as a unit. This is an extremely important lesson because it draws us closer. It changes our identities. We are no longer autonomous but dependent. Kids, perhaps for the first time, see that they are a valuable part of the family. Kids crave this. They don't do well when they believe they aren't needed, that they don't belong to the family. One of the most life-changing results of tragedy for kids is the shift in identity that can occur when they are told they are needed for the welfare of the family.

Asking each family member to pitch in and help can lead to something healing—helping others outside the home. There is no better treatment for selfishness, complaining, or whining than serving others. We look across the country and see companies making masks, hand sanitizers, and other medical supplies simply to help those on the front lines. From large businesses to lines of kids in neighborhoods reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in unison, trying to help and encourage one's neighbor brings tremendous joy in the midst of hardship. Once your kids are pitching in around the house, challenge them to

find someone who needs a letter, a bag of food, a Skype call, or even quiet prayers. When kids do this regularly, you will see them change before your eyes.

#### **4. Identify specific stressors and create a plan to relieve them.**

Sudden lifestyle change brings inordinate stress for everyone. Regardless of personality type, every man, woman, and child feels an internal unsettledness when life is turned on its head. The natural psychological process of change involves acknowledgment of a loss of something. With catastrophe, we lose control over our daily lives. When restaurants close and schools shut down, kids lose time with friends and parents lose their social outlets. And there are losses that are particular to each person's life. Our hearts are made to process loss, and as we do, we feel uncomfortable. Some, as we have seen, deny that any loss has occurred. COVID-19 isn't really a problem, some say. We have overreacted out of unreasonable fear, others assert. They do this to push back against the reality that it is here and that it is disrupting life as we've known it.

Others are mad at the virus. It has no right to take us down. After all, Americans live in the most scientifically advanced country in the world. How can an invisible microbe bring horror to so many lives? Doctors, kids, parents, and single people are rightly angry at the virus.

Then we grieve the changes and the loss. Some handle sadness well. Most don't. Many adults and kids have learned that sadness is to be tucked away into the recesses of the heart and mind and never let out. Others grieve unendingly, and this doesn't help them either. However a person handles denial, anger, or loss, the experience is stressful. Many of our emotions come out sideways, and we yell at our kids, spouse, or friends. Anxiety and stress are hard to get under control, but there are a few things that each of can do to mitigate their intensity.

First, it is important to pinpoint the specific reasons for the stress that catastrophe brings. Some feel out of control. Others grieve the life they had two weeks earlier. Still others



experience fear of paying bills because they have lost a job. If a person can identify specific sources of the stress, then his stress is likely to dissipate more quickly. For instance, if a mother feels acute anxiety because she fears that one of her kids will die, she can say to herself, “I am afraid that the coronavirus will kill one of my kids.” Then she can reason that, statistically, this is very unlikely to happen, and her stress will decrease. If she simply feels agitated and doesn’t identify the source, her anxiety will escalate and come out by criticizing and yelling at loved ones.

Once you have homed in on specific fears brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, you can find a way to diffuse that stress. This is different for every person. Some find that exercise eases stress. Some need quiet time, others need music, and others need a place to vent their anger physically. Once you determine what relieves your stress the most, build that into your day.

Find thirty minutes to listen to music, talk your stress through with a friend, beat the wall with a Nerf bat, or sit in a quiet room. If you don’t make a plan for stress relief, you will continue to take it out on your family, and this isn’t fair to them. You will find that intentionally finding a specific activity to relieve stress will help tremendously.

## **5. Practice prayer or meditation.**

Being alone with themselves is terrifying for some people. Quiet allows our thoughts to come to the fore, and many people don’t want to see their deepest thoughts. But we don’t need to be afraid. In fact, we can look forward to being with ourselves, alone with our minds. Prayer and meditation allow us to do this.

Prayer and meditation can be one and the same, or they can be quite different. It depends upon your focus. When we quiet ourselves, acknowledging the presence of God, we become settled in a way that doesn’t come from settling into quiet without Him. Prayer brings us into the presence of Another Who can help restore our lives, give us encouragement, and

allow us to express our frustrations. Prayer involves an exchange of thought and feelings between one being and another. It can be confusing; sometimes you can sense God's presence and other times you can't. But that's okay because God is still there. His presence doesn't depend on our feelings. It is a reality that we either acknowledge or ignore.

Mother Teresa spoke about her prayer experiences in profound terms. When a gentleman asked her, "What do you say to God when you pray?" she replied with her characteristic meekness, "I listen." He then asked, "What does God say to you when you listen?" She answered, "He listens." This response beautifully expresses the mystery of prayer. We are free to say anything to God. We are free to wait on Him, to listen to Him. And yet, we are free to say nothing to Him. Mother Teresa's words tell us that God simply wants us in His presence—sometimes asking for things, sometimes thanking Him for what we have, and other times simply sitting still.

Prayer brings us consciously before God and lets Him know that we are listening. We are there—waiting and wanting from Him. According to the Bible, God loves this. Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." God wants us to have rest, and often this comes from being quiet before him.

He waits for us to come and sit. He is like the invisible guest in our homes sitting quietly and patiently for us to stop and enjoy Him. If you have never spent any time in prayer, I encourage you to. It isn't magic, and you don't have to say just the right thing. True prayer is about coming to God and saying that you believe He is there and that you want to connect with Him. Period. The mysterious need we have is to be present with a loved one. Have you ever watched a movie alone and asked a loved one to join you? Of course you have. We all have. But we don't want to talk to him; we simply want him to sit with us, to remind us that we are not alone. Watching a movie without him would be a very different experience.

When you first try prayer, it can be life-changing or seem to accomplish nothing at all. But I guarantee that what Blaise

Pascal, C. S. Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and countless other souls have said is true: Over time, prayer changes us dramatically. The most profound effect of tragedy is teaching us to grow closer to God through prayer.

Meditation, on the other hand, can be just like prayer, or it can be quite different. Meditation that quiets the mind and heart helps diffuse stress and pain. It lowers the heart rate and slows breathing. Prayer can be a form of meditation because it does these things as well. Meditation that focuses on something other than yourself produces different results than meditation that focuses on yourself. Some meditators repeat certain sounds or words. This practice quiets them, but its effects are very different from those of prayer because God is not pulled in. Those meditators are alone. His response to them is left out.

For others, meditation can help them look inside themselves and see what harms them most. What habits, thoughts, or feelings do they need to deal with? Prayer will do the same thing. God can reveal in prayer what we need to do. That's good, because after meditation, we can reenter the hustle of life and do what is necessary to make changes.

As you can see, whether there is a difference between prayer and meditation depends on whom the focus is on. Yes, some will examine themselves in self-reflection, but ultimately the difference between prayer and meditation is that prayer always focuses on God, while meditation sometimes does and sometimes doesn't.

If you have never prayed before, I encourage you to start. Keep it simple—just begin talking to God. Here's an essential point, though: Don't just pray once and then forget about it. Commit to prayer for one month. Then watch for the transformation in your heart and life.

## **6. Schedule time every day for each family member to be alone.**

Being suddenly forced into close quarters can either draw family members closer or drive them apart, depending on the health of their relationships before the change. As a

pediatrician, I am thrilled to see parents spending more time with their kids. For years I have seen kids grow increasingly lonely and insecure, and much of the problem is lack of time with their parents. Kids who see their parents only minutes per day—and there are many like that—are hindered in their identity formation and maturity. The irony is that most kids crave more attention from their parents. They want connection, affection, and attention. Kids as young as three and as old as twenty know they want these things. Many are too insecure to ask their parents, and some fear that they will be rejected if they do ask. I repeatedly hear kids of all ages say these things.

One of the best blessings of tragedy is that it forces parents to spend more time with their kids. Some parents report that the time is stressful and that kids are often angry and misbehave. We need to remember that they are adjusting too. And if they had problems with their parents before the shift, those problems will become magnified under stress. If this is happening in your home, hang on. This is good. If kids and parents confront tensions in their relationship, then they can resolve them. Most kids don't experience resolution with their parents if they are never with them.

I want to reiterate that if your son or daughter is explosive now, stay calm. Don't take it personally. Your child is simply being forced to confront problems that may have been hidden before. While you may be tempted to stay far away from him, take a deep breath and move closer. Remember that this difficulty will afford you the time together to work through some long-standing problems. If you have serious concerns about your child or your relationship with him or her, find a good counselor. Most counselors are willing to do screen sessions with clients.

What does this have to do with everyone's spending some time apart? It is a normal human reaction to become stressed when a routine is changed. This stress is magnified when you are living in small quarters and cannot interact with anyone from outside. No matter how good your relationships with your kids

and spouse are, they will all improve if you schedule small times away from one another, even in the same house. Too much togetherness can hurt even the healthiest relationships.

The best way to do this is to find a time during the day—preferably about the same time each day—when everyone can go to a separate room for thirty minutes to an hour. If you have toddlers, put them down for a nap. If your kids are young but no longer napping, tell them to stay quiet in their rooms for the same amount of time. If they refuse to do this, tell them that they can come to your bedroom with you (if that's where you get your alone time), but they have to stay quiet. If they don't, they go to their own room. Explain to them that this isn't punishment. It is a time for everyone to get some rest, and even adults like you need rest time.

If you have teenagers, it's fine to let them watch a show or play a video game. Just be diligent about telling them what they can and can't play or watch. If you haven't already set restrictions on what they can play, this will be a tough time to start, but do it anyway. Encourage them to listen to music, work on a project they might like, or even chat with friends. The whole point is that you need physical and mental separation from one another. Tell your older kids that these are the reasons that you are implementing alone time. When you give them the reasons, they will appreciate them.

During your own alone time, do something that relaxes you. Listen to music, read, take a nap, work on a project—whatever you find relaxing. Thirty to sixty minutes may seem like a small amount of alone time compared with what you are used to, but that's okay. Take whatever you can and remind yourself that the intense togetherness is temporary.

## **7. Give yourself grace.**

Mothers in particular put far too many expectations on themselves daily. They make a mental checklist of what they should do to be a good mom, and the vast majority of items on that list are completely unnecessary. Making healthy meals all

the time, making sure that kids have something interesting or fun to do every moment of the day, making sure they are exposed to sports, the arts, you name it—any activity that might spur the children's interest. And when their lives are turned upside down, the list grows longer and becomes more demanding. Mothers (and fathers) feel that they should always be able to keep kids from fighting, that the kids should never be bored, that kids should keep the same academic pace they maintained in school, that they should not have more screen time than they did before the life change.

These are laudable goals, but most are impossible to achieve. Meals may not be as good since parents can't go to the grocery store as often. There will be financial strains. Kids will take their frustrations out on their siblings. They will be bored because even the most energetic and creative parent can't come up with enough to entertain children twelve hours a day. They will probably watch more television or movies, and that's okay. And their schoolwork will probably suffer. Most parents don't know the first thing about homeschooling, and expecting themselves to master it instantly is unreasonable.

The point is that parents need to cut themselves some slack. These are hard times. Days will not be like any they have experienced before. We need to let go of the expectations we placed on ourselves before COVID-19 and relax others. This isn't a time to double down on the work we need to do.

We all need to remember that the name of the game in tough times is *survival*. Tough times are different from normal life. Parents won't be able to do what they normally do, so when they feel inadequate, they need to let go of the guilt. Be kind to yourself when you feel you can't make home life all you want it to be.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the economy, increasing stress for parents. Some have lost jobs; some have been temporarily laid off. Financial struggles on top of mental and emotional ones can feel overwhelming. That's why it is more important than ever to have a plan to survive these difficult times. Perhaps one of the most important parts of that plan is

to be kind to yourself. Treat yourself as you would treat your best friend. Would you tell her to do a better job balancing working at home with entertaining, schooling, and keeping the kids from fighting? Of course you wouldn't. So why would you be more critical of yourself than your friend?

When life stressors appear from nowhere, we want to fix things. But we can't. We must wait out the crisis knowing that we are not alone. Our neighbors, friends, and family are experiencing the same trouble. That's why we need to look beyond the tension in our own homes and see how we can help others. Tragedy can make us stronger, but we can't get there alone. We need one another and God not only to survive but thrive.

We can do this. God bless each of you.

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## About the Author

**Meg Meeker, M.D.**, is the bestselling author of *Strong Fathers*, *Strong Daughters* as well as *You've Got This: Unlocking the Hero Dad Within*, *Raising a Strong Daughter in a Toxic Culture*, *Boys Should Be Boys*, and numerous other mainstays of child-raising advice. She practices pediatric and adolescent medicine with her husband, Walter, counseling teens and parents in northern Michigan.



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